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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: February 12, 2007

Coalition Conflicts

1. Controversies and conflicts have been dominating the climate in the SPOe/OeVP coalition since it took office a month ago. Any major issue seems to have the potential to split the coalition partners: privatization, elderly care, pension reform or environmental issues. The SPOe suspects the OeVP is pursuing a medium-term exit strategy and is contemplating a coalition with the FPÖ and the BZÖ, high-ranking SPOe spokesman Josef Kalina suggests in an interview with mass circulation daily "Kurier." OeVP Secretary General Hannes Misesethon denies this, saying that "instabilities within the SPOe leads to this unrest."

Eurofighter Committee Resumes Investigation

2. The Eurofighter committee resumes its work and will interrogate on Monday and Tuesday all the prominent members of the government in 2002, when the Eurofighter decision was made. Among them are former Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel and his Vice Chancellor Susanne Riess-Passer from the FPÖ, as well as former Minister of Defense Herbert Scheibner (formerly FPÖ, now BZÖ) and former FPÖ floorleader and now BZÖ boss Peter Westenthaler. The interrogation will focus on the rationale behind the decision in favor of the Eurofighter - why the former Minister of Defense preferred a different plane, the Gripen, but got the Eurofighter instead - and the exploration of possible contacts between the former members of the government with the Eurofighter producer EADS.

Gusenbauer Criticizes EU

3. The complaint filed by the EU Commission against Austrian quotas for medical students from the EU and especially from Germany, where access to medical studies is restricted, has prompted criticism from Austrian Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer, who pointed out that Austria and Germany had already come to a bilateral agreement. The EU is too eager to interfere into issues that are none of its business, criticized Gusenbauer and added that this was a main reason for growing EU skepticism.

Plassnik Says Rice To Visit

4. Austrian Minister for European and International Affairs Ursula Plassnik gave an interview to centrist daily "Die Presse," in which she announced her plans for an international Middle East women's conference in which US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will participate as well. A concrete date for the Middle East women's conference has not yet been set, but it is planned to take place in Vienna this year.

Plassnik said that she already had confirmations from the US Secretary of State and Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and

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that she was in contact with many women in the Arab world. Women are important when it comes to creating peace, the Austrian Minister for European and International Affairs pointed out - they hold society together and are particularly affected by wars and postwar reconstruction. "Therefore, they should also be sitting at the negotiation table," Plassnik said. That would also apply to current negotiations over Kosovo. With regard to these negotiations, Plassnik indicated a readiness to forge a compromise with Serbia and mentioned that Mladic's extradition might no longer be a precondition for Serbia's negotiations with the EU. With regard to the Iran conflict, the Minister referred to the clear line the international community was pursuing. Iran would be well-advised to take up the offer made to it in Vienna in 2006. However, Washington also should consider engaging in dialogue with the Iranians, recommended Plassnik. On the issue of US-Iran disagreement, she recommended integrating Iran into multinational forums for the discussion of regional security problems. With regard to the Declaration of Mecca and prospects for peace in the Middle East, Plassnik favors a policy of "positive dynamism": The new Palestinian agreement should be evaluated in an open-minded manner, but without the EU going overboard and financing a war among Palestinians or hostile actions against Israel.

Frosty Winds From Moscow

15. At the 43rd Security Conference in Munich, Russia's President Vladimir Putin gave a controversial speech reminiscent of pre-1989 days, saying the so-called monopolar world order encouraged an arms race and had nothing to do with democracy, was morally and ethically wrong and did not reflect economic reality. He particularly rejected erection of a missile defense system in Poland and the deployment of NATO "advance troops" in Bulgaria and Romania. All this was forcing Russia to step up its armament program, Putin said. His speech was sharply criticized by many Western participants, including Senator John McCain.

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer called Putin's speech "not helpful" and is "disappointed," quotes independent daily "Der Standard." New Pentagon boss Robert Gates is convinced that "one Cold War was quite enough." At the Munich conference, among the issues discussed were Afghanistan., where the Taliban are once again on the rise; Darfur - an issue higher on the American agenda than on the European one; China's engagement in Africa, which the paper calls "a greed-driven quest for resources"; and climate change, which was on the agenda of the conference for the first time this year.

Iran Warns Against US "Adventures"

16. In an interview with mass circulation daily "Kurier," Iran's chief negotiator Ali Larijani called on the US not to "engage in adventures on our doorstep." The problems between the US and Iran could be settled quietly, Larijani emphasized and pointed out that Iran's nuclear activities were all conducted under the supervision of the IAEA. The possibility of a military attack by US he rated low, adding that "Iran was preparing itself for various scenarios" and that an Iranian reaction to a possible US attack would be "very painful."

Asked by "Kurier" to comment on the IAEA decision to freeze almost half of the Iranian nuclear programs for the technical support of Iran, Larijani pointed out that the decision was based not on the conditions outlined by the IAEA, but on pressure from the UN Security Council. This way of dealing ultimately discredited the international organizations, Larijani said, adding that Iran was among the few who signed the Nuclear-Test-Ban-Treaty (NPT). On sanctions, Larijani affirmed that, painful as they were, his country was prepared to handle them. Iran had managed to survive sanctions before, and still develop modern technologies. Further, Larijani dismissed the US anti-terror strategy, asking rhetorically whether "the terror attacks have been diminished as a consequence [of that strategy] or have they increased?" Finally, he referred to Iran's good relations with European countries, where there exist good economic connections which the US will not be able to undermine through pressure. "In the final analysis, every country looks after

its own interests," concludes Larijani.

Obama's Bid for the White House

17. Major Austrian print media analyze the chances of Democratic Presidential contender Barack Obama to become America's first African-American President in 2008. The assessment ranges from skeptical (centrist daily "Die Presse") to positive. Washington correspondent for "Die Presse" Norbert Rief believes the dream of an African-American President in the White House will remain a dream - at least for 2008. The fact that he is black will not help Obama, for even in the "politically over-correct" US, skin color still plays a role - black candidates generally do better in the polls due to the fact that people are afraid of appearing racist, than they do in the actual elections, Rief points out. He also refers to Obama's lack of political experience - so far, he has only served 2 years in the Senate. The decisive question will be whether the Democrats consider Obama a candidate people will vote for. Rief believes American voters will not vote much differently in 2008 than in the polarized atmosphere three years ago. Any Democrat will have to convince Republican voters with his values. Obama is in favor of controlling weapons, and he is pro-abortion. For many Americans these are the only issues that count. Thomas Spang of "Salzburger Nachrichten" points to Obama's magnetism, his ability to capture and hold a large audience. Thanks to this enthusiasm, which Obama is able to inspire in his followers, his team wants to turn into a movement from below that will carry the "exceptional politician" right to the top. The daily rates high Obama's chances of becoming the first African-American President of the US, while at the same time cautioning against too much optimism. With every percentage point in the polls, pressure on Obama will grow.
McCaw